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SUBJECT: NETHERLANDS/ISAF: STATE OF PLAY, RECOMMENDATIONS

Classified By: Charge D'Affaires Chat Blakeman,  
reasons 1.4 (b,d)

¶1. (C) Summary: The Dutch cabinet's failure to reach consensus on ISAF Stage III, and PM Balkenende's controversial decision to refer the question to Parliament without a clear Cabinet mandate have complicated an already heated public debate. Parliament is now seized with the procedural question of who has ultimate authority to send troops abroad, and has postponed substantive discussion of deployment until late January or early February. The episode has exposed the fragility of the governing coalition, highlighted Balkenende's ineffective leadership, and shifted debate for now from national security to domestic politics. A positive deployment decision is still possible, but not before mid-February at the earliest. Post will continue to work to shift the public debate in favor of deployment, and to strengthen the GONL's negotiating position in Parliament. End summary.

#### CURRENT STATE OF PLAY

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¶2. (C) Supporters of the Dutch deployment to Uruzgan province have been struggling since October to build Cabinet and Parliamentary support for the mission, with limited success and many setbacks. Last fall, USG lobbying in Canberra to partner with the Dutch, the visit of A/S Fried and ASD Flory to the Hague, and a succession of meetings between Dutch CHOD Berlijn and SACEUR helped to answer concerns raised by DM Kamp regarding continued U.S. commitments and other security assurances. Kamp and FM Bot then stressed publicly that the Dutch were satisfied with the arrangements, understand the mission will be difficult, and are prepared to take casualties.

¶3. (C) Fragile GONL support for the deployment then fell victim to internal political posturing with local elections looming in March. On December 22, PM Balkenende, Bot, and Kamp were unable to persuade the Cabinet to take a unanimous decision in favor of deployment due to reservations by the two ministers representing junior coalition partner D-66. D-66 has come out against the deployment and believes it has public support for this position; one recent poll suggested that almost 70 percent of the Dutch public currently opposes deployment. Rather than risk an immediate Cabinet crisis, Balkenende merely announced the GONL's "intention" to deploy to Afghanistan pending Parliamentary approval, but stopping short of a formal Cabinet decision.

¶4. (C) Parliament has the constitutional authority to approve military deployments, but presenting the issue as an "intention" rather than a decision broke precedent and opened a political hornets' nest. Proponents and critics alike have described Balkenende's decision as "cowardly and weak," "ambivalent and confusing," and "completely lost." Others have begged the "government to govern." Coalition parties including the Christian Democratic Alliance (CDA) and Liberal Party (VVD) are pushing Balkenende to clarify his position, and have joined the opposition in refusing to debate the issue until Cabinet makes a firm decision. The parliamentary defense and foreign affairs committees have summoned Balkenende, Bot and Kamp for a "procedural discussion" on January 24. GONL officials expect no movement on the mission until this procedural question is resolved.

¶5. (C) Balkenende's inability to keep the Cabinet together clearly exposed his government's weaknesses. He could have forced a Cabinet decision with the D-66 ministers either abstaining or voting against the mission, and then pursued a simple majority in Parliament. But this bold stand was deemed too risky by the GONL, which feared a possible Cabinet crisis that could have forced early national elections -- in which all three coalition partners would likely be big losers. As a result, Balkenende has lost control of the issue. Even his own Christian Democratic Alliance is now calling for a two-thirds "super-majority" in favor of the mission, which would effectively give the opposition Labor Party (PvdA) a veto.

#### MOVING THE BALL

¶6. (C) Parliament's demand for clarification sets back the timeline another three weeks or more. But the delay affords an opportunity to coordinate closely with the GONL and allies to influence the eventual parliamentary debate in favor of Stage III participation. We should stress the "positive" aspects of the mission, while making clear the negative consequences of a failure to deploy. Delinking OEF and ISAF will be key. We should take steps to ensure that any interaction -- NATO, USG, Afghan government -- with Dutch officials is consistent. At the same time, we are pressing the GONL bilaterally to solidify its ranks.

¶7. (C) Post will send separately a strategy paper with concrete steps, including the following:

-- GONL/Allies Coordination: Post has been in regular contact with the PM's Office and senior MFA officials, and with UK, Canadian, and Australian counterparts. We are hosting a meeting this week to discuss strategy in light of the changed circumstances -- the Canadian and Australian ambassadors will attend along with the UK Charge, and their defense attaches. Canadian PM Martin wrote Balkenende encouraging Dutch participation; senior officials from Britain and Australia should be encouraged to weigh in privately, and if possible, in public. The UK-Dutch Labor Party connection could also be exploited.

-- Parliament outreach: Post has scheduled meetings this week and next with key parliamentary leaders, most of whom have been on holiday since Christmas.

-- CODEL Landrieu: Although focused on water management, we have recommended to Sen. Landrieu's staff that she reach out to press/parliamentary contacts about Afghanistan while visiting the Netherlands January 10-13.

-- Washington outreach: D attendance at the Dutch-proposed energy security conference on February 6-8 would provide excellent opportunities to influence the debate. A call from the President to Balkenende, or from S or D to Bot, to reinforce our interest in a successful resolution and to offer assistance could help to shore up their political commitment to push the mission through Parliament. A high-level U.S. delegation or individuals, particularly with NATO experience and strong trans-Atlantic reputations, would

be helpful.

-- London Conference: The GONL plans to use the January 31 donor's conference in London to build the case in support of the mission. USG participants should be prepared to engage.

-- NATO outreach: SYG de Hoop Scheffer has been actively involved in the debate behind the scenes; the GONL is considering whether to involve him further.

-- Afghan Government Outreach: Post has been in contact with the Afghan ambassador in Brussels -- who is accredited to The Hague. He has been silent so far but we are encouraging him to send a clear message about the importance of the Dutch mission for Afghan stability and security.

-- UN outreach: The GONL plans to invite senior UN officials, such as Francisc Vendrel and UN Special Representative to Afghanistan Arnault, to speak in favor of the mission. We should support these efforts.

-- Digital Video Conferences: Post will arrange DVCs for key officials to explain to Dutch parliamentarians, editors and journalists the importance of the Dutch mission. Possible participants would include U/S Burns, SACEUR, SYG de Hoop Scheffer, President Karzai, and influential U.S. Senators/Representatives such as Sen. McCain. We would also seek to include NGOs such as Freedom House to discuss democratic programs in Afghanistan.

-- Op-Eds/Letters: Post will seek to place op-eds/letters written on behalf of key officials in influential media outlets to counter misinformation, foster informed debate, and encourage Dutch participation in Stage III. Officials might include President Karzai, SYG de Hoop Scheffer, Secretary Rice, influential Senators such as Sen. McCain or

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Sen. Landrieu, and Rep. Shuster after his recent visit to the Netherlands.

18. (C) Comment: Balkenende is proving to be a weak partner unable to overcome Cabinet divisions and an increasingly confident political opposition. We can no longer count on his lame-duck government to persuade both the Dutch Parliament and public to support the Stage III deployment. Practically every Dutch politician asks the same questions: how will Washington and allies react, and what will the consequences be if there is a negative decision? We must use every opportunity between now and February to shift the terms of the debate in both Parliament and the public -- this means a consistent, clear message from all involved regarding the importance and stakes of the mission. End comment.

BLAKEMAN